Scottish Swimming

The Benefits of Swimming Pools

December 2024



Foreword

Our survival as human beings depends on water. Water can also be enjoyed in a number of ways recreationally for a rewarding, healthy and long life.

Swimming pools, even in their earliest forms, have been enjoyed socially and medicinally since ancient times and their benefits are still appreciated today. In this report we explore the many benefits of swimming and swimming pools from a health, safety, community, social and sporting perspective.

With life expectancy in Scotland the lowest of all UK nations, pools and open water spaces are a crucial component of our health service. They help to prevent and manage some of our most prevalent health conditions, saving the nation millions and reducing the burden on the NHS in terms of resource.

Swimming pools have a vital safety role to play. In this report we explore how pools are the first stage in securing the safety of children in, on and around water by hosting vital lessons in learning to swim. As a nation, our drowning statistics are more than double the UK rate per head of population and with water never far away, water safety education in swimming pools is critical.

In terms of equality and inclusion, the gentle, weight-bearing qualities of water means it is accessible to all and it is one of the highest participation sports for those with disabilities or mobility issues. The availability, affordability and accessibility of pools is vital for creating a fairer and more inclusive society in Scotland.

Swimming pools are there to help secure the health and success of our nation but we need continued investment in the sector to deliver this for current and future generations.

With the right support in the right places at the right time, we can ensure a sustainable network of pools to improve and protect the health of the nation for all ages, abilities and backgrounds. Think of pools as an extension of our national health service. They have a vital role to play in keeping our children safe, our adults active and driving forward the health and wellbeing of our country.

Euan Lowe CEO, Scottish Swimming

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Executive Summary

Swimming pools and leisure centres lie at the heart of many a community. They are a hive of positive energy thriving with individuals, families and clubs, coming together for safety, sport and social interaction.

The benefits of swimming pools are well documented. Not only are pools recognised for their health benefits and their part in hosting vital water safety lessons for children, but for their cultural value as places for communities to connect, socialise and make friends.

In Scotland, swimming is the fastest growing sport since the pandemic[1] and the number one sport in 2022 in terms of medals won at a Commonwealth and Olympic Games.

While podium places are a desirable outcome for our nation, the real benefit of swimming and aquatics activity lies in the health benefits – preventing some of our most prevalent diseases and conditions and in so doing, reducing the burden on the NHS.

Pools play a pivotal role in the safety and education of children and adults through potentially life saving swimming lessons. They are active places of learning as outlined in the Scottish Government's new National Framework for Physical Activity and Health. With an abundance of inland waters and miles of coastline, water safety skills and education through school swimming in Scotland are critical and our swimming pools provide a safe and supervised environment in which to learn.

But pools are under threat.

Escalating costs, particularly energy bills in recent years, has put unprecedented pressure on pools to close as local authorities battle with budget deficits. Where pools have remained open, often they have been forced to operate with limited opening hours or a reduced activity provision.

In many cases pools have been forced to put up prices – preventing participation from those who need it most and widening inequalities in sport.

There is much that can be done to prevent pool closures.

Long term investment and the right support in the right places can help us to secure a network of modern, carbon-efficient pools and renovate existing swimming pools to extend their usable lifespan to deliver the programmes we need.

To achieve this, Scottish Swimming recommends:

- **Invest in school swimming to provide water safety education and skills to every child in Scotland, especially those who cannot swim**
- **Support investment for the sustainable pools of the future, renovating existing pool stocks to make them energy efficient and building the next generation of carbon-efficient pools**
- **Align the benefits of community sport with health ambitions and requirements through co-location of services to ensure sport is at the forefront of health preventative measures**
- **Promote swimming as a positive pursuit to drive the health agenda in Scotland particularly for the inactive who would benefit from the unique qualities of water-based exercise**

Action is now needed at a national government level. Ambitious policies combined with financial investment will create the change needed to prevent pool closures and secure sustainable pool space for current and future generations.

By taking action now we can continue to deliver national objectives around safety, health, communities and sport, creating a healthier, more successful nation and a fairer, more inclusive society for all.

1 Scottish Household Survey, 2022

The Benefits of Swimming

Swimming pools are happy, safe and social spaces where people come together for fitness, fun and friendship.

Since Roman times, swimming pools have been recognised for their health benefits and are still a critical component in safeguarding the health and wellbeing of the population today. In the UK alone swimming generated more than £2.4 billion in social value savings in 2022.[2]

Swimming benefits society through improved mental and physical health, better life satisfaction and enhanced individual, social and community development. Without swimming pools we run the risk of a health crisis and the loss of a lifeline for communities across Scotland.



2 The Value of Swimming, Swim England, September 2023

The Future of Swimming Pool Facilities

There are 396 public swimming pools in Scotland of which 56% are over 30 years old.[3] Scottish Swimming has calculated that 200 pools are at risk of closure by 2030 based on age alone unless significant investment can be secured to renovate existing pools and build the next generation of carbon-efficient pools.

The 2023 report **The Future of Swimming Facilities in Scotland** identified that to maintain current pool provision, five new pools across four sites need to be built every year at an estimated minimum cost of £40.5 million. The report **A Sustainable Future** by Scottish Swimming also identified energy efficiencies that can be made within existing pools that, when totalled, can save around £5 million a year.[4]

396 public swimming pools in Scotland

56% are **30+** years old

On top of this, current pools need refurbishment and renovations to extend their usable lifespan. With appropriate maintenance and investment a pool can last up to 60 years or more but only if regularly maintained.

The reality is that we will need a mixture of old and new for current and future generations, as outlined in **Scottish Swimming's Strategic Vision for Facilities**. If we fail to maintain existing stocks and do not invest in building the new carbon-efficient, sustainable pools of the future, then we risk a generation not being able to swim. We need pools for safety, for health, for communities, for social interaction and for sport.



3 The Future of Swimming Facilities in Scotland, Scottish Swimming, November 2023
4 A Sustainable Future: Enhancing Energy Efficiencies in Scotland's Swimming Pools, Scottish Swimming, November 2023

Safety

While water brings enormous enjoyment, danger is never too far away. With Scotland's accidental drownings more than double the UK rate per head of population, swimming pools are a vital national asset for teaching children to swim.[5]

1,533,744 children participated in swimming lessons in Leisure Trust facilities in 2023.[6] Every week, through community learn to swim programmes, Leisure Trusts host potentially life-saving lessons for over 100,000 children. School swimming provides further opportunities reaching children whose only opportunity to access swimming is through school. Every child needs access to a swimming pool now and in the future to create a fairer, more equal and inclusive society. The key to this is school swimming through the National Primary School Swimming Framework supported by Scottish Water and developed with support from sportscotland.[7] With government investment of £6 million a year we could give every Primary 5 child in Scotland essential life skills in water safety.

95% **of the Scottish population agree that pools are important for safety[8]**

Swimming pools are interactive and fun classrooms where children and adults learn a skill which not only saves lives, but opens up a world of recreational and safer water sport opportunities that would not otherwise exist.

Swimming pools are safe havens for a number of activities and sports. Canoeists use pools to master life-saving roll techniques, scuba diving clubs practise using life-saving equipment, rowers learn capsize drills and emergency services practise under water rescues. Without pools, this broad and varied aquatics community would not be able to practise the skills and drills that keep them safe.



5 WAID statistics, www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/waid/annual-reports-and-data May 2024
6 Community Leisure UK, April 2024 7 School Swimming Framework | Scottish Swimming 8 JL Partners, February 2024

Safety Case Study: Jim Gallacher



What is your role in terms of water safety?
I have been volunteering as chief safety officer with Scottish Swimming and at various open water swimming events for the past 16 years. As a team of safety volunteers involving an open water rescue team and kayakers, we learn something new every year and continually advance our knowledge to ensure we are up to date with the latest safety advice and guidance.

Why is learning to swim so important in Scotland?
We have so many inland waters in Scotland, as well as miles of coastline so learning to swim in a safe, controlled and supervised swimming pool environment is critical to stay safe in, on and around water. Swimming pools are by far the best place to learn – a warm, comfortable and safe environment without hidden hazards.

What are the dangers of swimming outdoors?
In Scotland the main threat is the cold and cold water shock as the temperature of the water can be very low even in summer. Hypothermia can sneak up on even the most accomplished swimmers to cause erratic behaviour and cold water shock can be debilitating. There are also hidden hazards when open water swimming such as rocks or objects beneath the surface or water-based risks such as blue-green algae or Leptospirosis.

What precautions can people take when swimming outdoors?
Wetsuits are great pieces of kit for keeping out the cold and can help with flotation. Swimmers can still get cold in wetsuits but the cold takes longer to penetrate so wetsuits offer a layer of protection. Tow floats and brightly coloured swimming caps can assist with visibility when there are other water users and swimming in groups is recommended. It's always good to think through 'what if' scenarios and know you can help yourself out of situations if things go wrong.

If someone does get into difficulty what can they do?
Floating rather than swimming is the most effective way of conserving energy and keeping yourself safe when in difficulty in water. For swimmers, floating tends to come easily but can be more difficult for non-swimmers who may tend to panic.

Why is school swimming important?
School swimming means that all children can experience water regardless of age or background and if children have experienced being in water they are less likely to panic and more likely to know what to do if they get into difficulty. School swimming teaches children essential water safety skills like floating and treading water.

What opportunities does swimming open up?
Not only does learning to swim save lives, it also opens up a whole world of water sports like kayaking, sailing and paddleboarding to name a few. These activities and sports become instantly safer if you can swim and make for a more enjoyable experience for all involved. Learning to swim is not so much about creating Olympic athletes but more about creating confident, safer and competent swimmers who can enjoy the many opportunities that water offers.

For more information on water safety visit
Water Safety | Scottish Swimming

Water Safety

Scotland has unusual and unique geography with around 30,000 inland waters and 11,800km of coastline.[9] In 2023, 47 people lost their lives through accidental drownings in Scotland.[10] That is 9 drownings per million people. As well as the tragic loss of life, one drowning is estimated by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) to cost £1.7 million.[11]

Scotland's Drowning Prevention Strategy, launched in 2018 aims to reduce accidental drownings fatalities by 50% by 2026.

Scottish Swimming are part of Water Safety Scotland – a government supported organisation and an association of voluntary organisations and individuals whose main purpose is to understand the risks around water in Scotland and to engage with partners to develop a consistent approach to the prevention of water related fatalities.

47 **people lost their lives through accidental drownings in 2023**

As part of the consistent approach to reducing water related fatalities Water Safety Scotland have developed the Water Safety Code. Open water is particularly dangerous and some basic aquatic skills such as floating, treading water and sculling can help in emergency situations. Swimming lessons and school swimming sessions are critical for teaching basic water safety skills that can save lives.



Stop and Think, Spot the Dangers



Stay Together, Stay Close



In an Emergency, Call 999

9 Wikipedia and Water Safety Scotland
10 WAID statistics, www.nationalwatersafety.org.uk/waid/annual-reports-and-data May 2024 **11** www.rospa.com

Physical Health

Swimming pools not only improve health and wellbeing, but help prevent some of our most prevalent health conditions through regular exercise, creating significant health cost savings.

From a physical health perspective the weight-bearing properties of water make swimming accessible for all ages and abilities including the inactive. From cradle to grave, exercise in water can keep children and adults fit and healthy and help individuals to manage a range of common conditions from obesity to diabetes, back pain to arthritis.

By providing a gentle, non-weight bearing environment for exercise, swimming and water-based exercise are ideal for injuries, joint conditions or chronic pain. It can help individuals remain fit and avoid too much strain on the body when land-based exercise is not possible.

86% **of the Scottish population agree swimming pools are important for health**[12]

Swimming is an important form of rehabilitation after strokes, heart attacks, joint replacements and cancer treatment. The gentle and warm pool environment is kind to joints and muscles and means exercise can be enjoyed at any level of intensity to suit all levels of fitness. There are many GP referral programmes in Scotland where water-based exercise is prescribed as an essential part of recovery and rehabilitation. Scottish Swimming's #NeverTooLate campaign promotes aquatic sport and activity at any age for positive physical health.

It is clear that swimming has a critical role to play in supporting physical health. Swimming is a cost-effective strategy for improving health and preventing illness and injury which place a significant burden on the NHS. A joined-up approach, harnessing the benefits of swimming to prescribe exercise treatments for a range of conditions, would generate significant savings for the NHS every year in terms of costs and resources.



12 JL Partners, February 2024

Physical Health Spotlight: Obesity

Obesity is a significant public health concern in Scotland. It can increase the risk of heart disease, cancers and strokes – the highest causes of death in Scotland.

Headline findings from the Scottish Health Survey in 2023 show that almost a third of adults (32%) were recorded as living with obesity, the highest level recorded in the survey since 2003. The data for children continues to paint a worrying picture. The 2023 data highlights that 30% of children aged 2-15 are at risk of combined overweight and obesity, and 17% are at risk of obesity. These figures are a slight decrease from the previous year (33% and 18% in 2022) but still nevertheless represent a worrying gap and lack of progress towards achieving the Scottish Government's ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030 to 7%.[13]

30% **of children aged 2–15 are at risk of combined overweight and obesity**

Routine swimming at a young age makes it less likely that children will develop obesity and health complications, saving the NHS millions. Furthermore, swimming is one of the few forms of exercise which can be available to the inactive. The weight-bearing properties of water and gentle pool environment makes it ideally suited to those with mobility issues or where chronic pain can make land-based exercise difficult.



13 www.obesityactionscotland.org

Physical Health Case Study: Laura Mcleod



Interview with Laura Mcleod Aberdeen, aged 37

When did you decide to learn to swim?
I have fibromyalgia and arthritis in my knees so I was struggling with general exercise. My GP recommended swimming as the best form of exercise but I had a fear of the water so did not get in to the pool until my mobility got really bad in 2019. I finally started lessons after the pandemic in October 2023 with Sport Aberdeen as part of the Scottish Swimming and Scottish Water Framework for Learn to Swim.

What benefits have you found from learning to swim?
I am diabetic and my blood sugars are doing great now too, partly thanks to my swimming lessons and adopting a healthier lifestyle. I have also lost a couple of stone in weight. Going into the pool took a long time even to build water confidence to go in but going to the lessons has built my confidence a lot more.

I was self-conscious at first and thought everyone was looking at me, but everyone is there to do their own thing and nobody stares. If I can do it anyone can do it!

What other experiences have you had while learning to swim?
It's really helped my outlook in general. I had lost a lot of confidence and had some anxiety talking to people. It was good to speak to others who also had a fear of the water so I felt 'I am not the only one'. This was very important to me. I float in the deep end and enjoy being in the deep end. My confidence has grown so much.

How has swimming affected your mental health?
I don't know what it is about swimming but it's definitely helped my mental health. I feel happier and having fun in the lesson really helps. It's relaxing and calming and I always come out feeling a hundred times better. I struggled with mental health for a while but this has really helped me. Being in the water is a great feeling. When you are relaxed enough to float, it's almost like meditating.

How have the Instructors helped you?
The instructors have been patient and encouraging, I am no longer aquaphobic although I am not fully confident yet, that confidence builds every week. I am nearly 5 months in to swimming lessons, I am not quite swimming yet but I feel confident in the water, under water and with aquatic breathing. My instructors challenge me each session and would never push me to do something they didn't think I was capable of. They take time to focus on where they think my confidence and skill needs to be improved and have a very person-centred approach to teaching.

What would you say to someone else to recommend swimming?
It's the best thing I've ever done. If it wasn't for this I still would have been stuck at home struggling with mobility. The whole teaching team have been absolutely amazing. I could not fault them.

The confidence my instructors have instilled in me has had a positive impact on other aspects of my life also. My mental and general health have improved, I am much more confident than I ever was before too. I would highly recommend any adult non-swimmer or aquaphobic person to give it a go. It really will change your life.

Mental Health

Poor mental health is an important public health challenge and significant mental health inequalities exist in Scotland. It is estimated that 1 in 4 people will suffer from a mental health condition in any given year according to a nationwide health survey in 2021.[14] Improving the mental health and wellbeing of the population is a national priority because this is recognised as having a positive effect on many different aspects of society.

The Scottish government's mental health strategy 2017 to 2027 commits to a focus on prevention and early intervention for children, young people and adults (including over-65s), to help prevent the development of mental health problems and to step in promptly if they do develop. The government is committed to ensuring that improving mental health and wellbeing are central in our new public health priorities – swimming has a vital role to play in improving mental health. At a young age in particular, school swimming helps give access to water safety skills to every child, tackling poverty – one of the biggest drivers of poor mental health, and providing a healthy activity which supports a fairer and more inclusive society.

70% **of regular swimmers in Scotland swim for mental health[15]**

Depression, anxiety and dementia are some of our most prevalent mental health conditions. For many, swimming pools provide a warm and relaxing environment which improves mental health. Water can have a calming effect which boosts mood and takes away stress.

14 www.mind.org.uk
15 JL Partners, February 2024



Mental Health Case Study: Baltic Boys



The Baltic Boys are a men's cold water 'dooking' (dipping) social group who meet every Sunday morning for a dip in the North Sea on the beach at Aberdeen.

The group was founded by Matt Middler, who had been a member of the 'Blue Balls' outdoor swimming group in Portobello, Edinburgh, before moving to Aberdeen. Starting the Baltic Boys had an immediate impact and the group has grown quickly since September 2022.

Matt realised that dipping or 'dooking' regularly each week had become an essential part of his positive physical and mental health so did not think twice about starting up a group when he moved to Aberdeen for work.

There are around 70 participants in the group and they get a new person coming along to try the group every couple of weeks or so. The group is LGBT friendly and is very welcoming to new participants. It is not a constituted club nor a charity but rather a relaxed group of individuals who come together for fun, health and friendship.

Matt commented,
"The benefits of this group are really far reaching. Men often find it difficult to talk about problems and issues but this group provides a safe space for men to benefit from positive chat while having fun at the same time which is fantastic for mental health."

"There are some people in the group who have gone through some dark times and the Baltic Boys group has got them through it supporting their mental health and ensuring they have friends and a support network they can tap into."

"We typically go for a 20 minute dip and then go for a coffee and chat together afterwards. For many in the group this is the highlight of their week. The mental health benefits are clear but we do not label it as such. As an outsider looking in, you will mostly see us laughing from the moment we meet to the moment we part."

Cold water dipping comes with its own health benefits when done safely and this social group gain not only the physical advantages but the mental benefits of friendships, fun and social interaction.

Communities

Swimming pools are the beating heart of many a community. Pools are vibrant places – often community hubs where people of all ages and abilities come together for fun and fitness. From the first splashes of water on a baby's face to the regular routine of a recreational swim, swimming can be enjoyed by children, families, individuals and some 150 community clubs across Scotland supporting 23,000 members.

For all the athletes enjoying aquatics sport in Scotland there is an army of dedicated volunteers committed to delivering and developing sport day in and day out to benefit local communities. Not only does this support the individuals participating in sport directly, but the thousands of volunteers who benefit from being actively involved in their local communities.

88% **of the Scottish population agree that pools are important for communities**[16]

For many, pools are a lifeline for health, fitness and social interaction, providing a safe space for exercise and preventing social isolation regardless of age, ability or background.

Furthermore, community clubs are the ideal place to embed water safety skills learned in swimming lessons and provide experiences for athletes and volunteers to learn transferable skills and make lifelong friendships to help them achieve their full potential.



16 JL Partners, February 2024

Communities Case Study: Bellshill Sharks



Bellshill Sharks are a community swimming club with around 98 swimmers and 40 non-athletes (volunteers and coaches) who support the club. In October 2023 Bellshill Sharks discovered their local pool, Sir Matt Busby Sports Complex, was going to be closed so they rallied together as a community and mobilised their members to voice their concerns about the pool closure.

Within hours of the news, the club set up a petition with the theme 'Save Our Pool' and set up a brainstorming meeting with all parents and children within the club. It became apparent very quickly that there were a number of parents with skills, contacts and expertise in marketing, media and PR that were willing to support the cause to keep the pool open.

Communications were critical so they set up a dedicated 'closure' email address, and a separate group on WhatsApp so as not to detract from the day to day running of the club and forthcoming galas.

The club made sure the children were involved – after all the closure would affect them the most. They wrote letters to councillors, MSPs and Scottish Swimming, made posters to protest outside the swimming pool building, and prepared for media interviews with broadcasters.

Bellshill Sharks made contact with other users of the facility to extend the reach of the campaign: divers who use the pool, the football team who use the pitches and Taekwon-do who use the sports hall.

They built relationships with MSPs and councillors and reached out to famous celebrities who once swam at the pool or who were from the area. Everyone rallied together as a whole community and they managed to get airtime on the STV news. Thankfully the decision was reversed by the council and the pool was saved for the time being.

Bellshill Sharks celebrated with the most successful gala they have ever had and have enjoyed a huge amount of interest from surrounding communities interested in joining the club. This is a great example of community cohesion – volunteers, families and children coming together to give their club a voice in desperate times to overcome barriers to participation and ultimately keep their pool open.

Social

Swimming pools are part of the social fabric of society. Not only have pools been recognised for their great health benefits, but for their cultural value as a place to socialise, meet and make friends. Whether you are the young people in a club who train together day in and day out or the recreational swimmer having a casual chat in the lane, water-based exercise is social and there are many a swimming group who enjoy a coffee together after their exercise.

For young club members, swimming is a way of life. It keeps them physically fit, mentally resilient and socially active. When pools close, as they did during the pandemic, this has a devastating effect on the health and wellbeing of people. In some rare and very sad cases, stopping exercise had catastrophic impacts.

91% **agree that pool closures are bad for communities**[17]

Community clubs need affordable, accessible and available pool space to do their best for their athletes and volunteers.

Pools are somewhere to hang out with friends. They are community hubs – a hive of activity and positive energy with young and old enjoying the water and relaxing in the café for a drink afterwards. Time at the pool is a positive and productive way to spend time and can keep young people out of trouble as they seek something to do. Swimming has been proven to generate social value savings including reduced crime and improved social and community development.



17 JL Partners, February 2024

Sport

Pre-pandemic, swimming was Scotland's highest participation sport.[18] It is now the fastest growing. Around 16% of the Scottish adult population swim at least once a month[19] and as such swimming is still one of Scotland's most popular sports. What is more, pools are used by all – from birth to old age and everyone in between.

Swimming is Scotland's most successful sport with more medals won at the last Commonwealth Games and the Olympics than any other sport. But to earn a place on the podium every athlete has a training journey that can involve a number of community swimming pools.

Aquatics offers individual and team opportunities with choice in swimming, diving, artistic swimming, water polo or open water swimming. It's possible to learn, train and compete in Scotland at the highest level of the sport.

87% **of the Scottish Population agree swimming pools are important for our success as a sport[20]**

Community sport through aquatics club membership offers fun, friendships, physical fitness, mental strength and transferable skills not just for the athletes directly involved but for the thousands of volunteers who support their community clubs. This can have a huge impact on subjective well-being, individual development and life satisfaction. Club sporting success is not just about podium places but about achieving personal goals and milestones which enhance wellbeing.



18 Scottish Household Survey, 2022 **19, 20** JL Partners, February 2024

Sport Case Study: Hannah Miley MBE



Where did you learn to swim?
Would you believe me if I told you that a community pool can produce an Olympian, a Commonwealth champion, a World Champion, a European Champion, and a British Champion? This is my story and that is Inverurie swimming pool – a basic 4 lane, 25m pool with one life guard.

When did you join a swimming club?
At the age of 4 my parents took me to local council swimming lessons, where I was terrified of the deep end, convinced there were sharks and alligators hiding in there. By the age of 6 my confidence and competence in water grew, so I signed up to join the local amateur swimming club, Garioch. I remained part of that club for pretty much 20 years. I always get asked the question why didn't you move to a performance centre or change clubs. Personally it was where I felt I belonged, somewhere I fitted in and I loved the community. It was my way of life and I have so many fond memories... I wouldn't change a thing. I didn't need anything more than what I already had. Everything I needed was right there in my community.

Have you experienced no access to a swimming pool?
Covid, for me was the first time in my life I had no access to a pool. I felt lost, frustrated and stressed. Swimming was my life, my career and without it I suffered. To go from training day in and day out to all of a sudden nothing with the pool closures. You don't need to be a scientist to know the importance of mental health and physical wellbeing and what the pandemic did to that. My mental health was really not okay.

What impact do pool closures have on health?
I saw so many young athletes suffer with their mental health when their sporting club closed due to Covid. So many families' lives were turned upside down during this time that we are still seeing the after effects.

Keeping pools open is not just for the sake of the sport, it's for the mental and physical wellbeing of all those who seek out the pool to have somewhere they belong to. Pools provide a sense of community – a social group whose members have something in common, a shared identity and shared interests or passions.

What does an aquatics community look like?
There's a sense of place – the pool! It's the friends you make and that sense of belonging, being part of a club or team. It's the coaches who advise, guide, challenge and support you through the highs and lows; the parents, forever swim taxis offering up their spare time to help volunteer at weekends to support competitions and training; staff tirelessly working behind the scenes maintaining a facility and safely running the pool, training up young teens for the summer job as a lifeguard or swim teacher. This is just a small snapshot.

A pool is more than just going for a swim, it's about connections – the people we meet, the support from one another, improvements whether it's to your mental health, physical wellbeing, social skills, technical development or just wanting to get out of the house and move.

What has swimming taught you?
Swimming has taught me many things: resilience, confidence, perseverance but ultimately the power of community. Without swimming I certainly would not be the person that I am today. The lessons learned stay with you for life – just like learning to ride a bike or just like learning to swim you never lose it. If we lose pools we will lose our communities – those support networks, skills and a safe place for people. It's no wonder that swimming pools truly are the heart of communities.

I am just one swimmer from one community pool. Even though I'm now a retired athlete, I am still a swimmer and always will be a community swimmer.

Inclusion

Swimming reaches under-represented groups. Women, who typically do less sport, generate 60% of swimming's Social Value.[21] Women in Sport is a key priority of the Health, Social Care and Sports Committee and pools, through swimming and water-based exercise, can address the gap in female participation.

For people with disabilities, swimming is the highest participation sport, alongside cycling.[22] Scottish Swimming's #SeeMyAbility programme shows that 66% of children with disabilities are in mainstream lessons compared with 54% in 2020. The weight bearing properties of water means swimming uniquely supports, not only those with disabilities, but those recovering from injury and the inactive. 30% of the Social Value of swimming is generated by adults over 65.[23] What is more, swimming can be enjoyed well above this age. This not only supports Scotland's ageing population, but contributes enormously to health savings.

Highest participation sport

For people with disabilities, swimming is the highest participation sport, alongside cycling

Saving swimming pools is critical. They are lifelines for communities, clubs, individuals and families who rely on them for physical and mental health and general wellbeing. Pools are a vital part of our nation's armoury in keeping our communities, clubs, individuals and families mentally and physically healthy and providing inclusive opportunities for all.

21, 23 Changing Lives, Saving Lives, Scottish Swimming. April 2023 **22** Scottish Household Survey 2022.



Inclusion Case Study: Adam Donnachie



How did you learn to swim and get into swimming?
I was going on holiday and my parents thought it was very important for me to learn to swim especially as a double leg amputee. They thought it would just be a good life skill to have.

I was originally in one-to-one lessons in South Lanarkshire at Larkhall swimming pool. In one-on-one lessons I progressed very quickly and it was identified early on that I could be a club swimmer. Within a year I was in my first club which was Clyde Valley Beavers – a Para club in Wishaw. That's where things took off. I went to my first competition through Scottish Disability Sport at the regional championships. I didn't win much but you could see the enjoyment and I had never been exposed to other people with disabilities before. That's where my love for the sport grew.

How did things progress from learn to swim?
Club-wise things started to go well and I started to represent Scotland. I moved into my first mainstream club which is the natural transition for para swimmers once they get to a certain level. I moved to Motherwell and Wishaw and then Blantyre where I broke my first Scottish Record

Social-wise, the relationship with my coach Debbie Jones and my relationship with other swimmers also brought on my social confidence at that time and just helped me accept my disability. It was at the time of being an awkward teenager and you feel a bit weird about your disability – not in a bad way but you start to notice things you can and can't do and it sometimes frustrates you. In the pool I was fine as I thought I can go. I am okay – as much as I don't kick, my arms are still going to carry me.

By about 2016, I moved to East Kilbride and that was ultimately my final swimming club. My best event out of all the years I swam was the 400m Freestyle. It slowly started taking off and my times started to improve. I also started to look fitter as an athlete. I valued that time because I was older and enjoyed it more, and I think that's because I was swimming with folk my age. I think that's a big thing no matter what level you are at, whether that is grass roots learn to swim or all the way through to the elite level. If you are swimming with people your own age you enjoy it more because you can relate to each other and have the same interests.

What made you change sports?
I'm pretty sure if you asked anyone at Scottish Disability Sport they would say that I've tried everything! My logic for a long time was there will be a sport out there that will take me to the Paralympics.

Basketball was a good fit with swimming as I was so top heavy dominant it helped me push my chair faster. Other sports I tried at that time included kayaking, athletics where I have ended up but the base swimming has given me – strength and power – fits into most sports.

In athletics I am a seated shot putt, javelin and discus thrower, Javelin and discus being my main two. I'm an F57 internationally classified para thrower, European no 11 and the UK no 1. The base that swimming gave to me is huge. It has given me strength, build and confidence, performance lifestyle experience etc. I knew how to train. Any athlete that gets up at 4.30am to go to training will do well in another sport because they know how to train.

Tell me about how you give back to the sport through coaching and teaching
I am employed by Glasgow Life as a physical activity coach for their learn to swim programme. I'm teaching 9 hours a week. I like it because at grass roots it gives you a whole new perspective and a whole new love for the sport. I think it helps the kids to see someone with a disability and fills them with confidence and some of the parents I've spoken to recognise me from competitions.

Why are swimming pools so important?
Swimming is for everybody – anybody can swim but you never know where swimming is going to take you. It's hard to see all the stories about swimming pools shutting. I think some people won't get the opportunity to swim or learn to swim. Everybody needs the opportunity to learn to swim. Not everyone is going to be the next Duncan Scott, but everyone who swims will have a life-saving skill.

Success

Aquatics is one of the most successful and popular sports for British teams at the Olympics and Paralympics – the pinnacle of the sport. With a number of disciplines ranging from swimming to diving, from artistic swimming to open water swimming, aquatics is an attractive proposition for both competitors and spectators.

At the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics, swimming was the most successful sport in terms of medals won. Scottish athlete Duncan Scott returned home the most decorated athlete in a single Games in 2020 and with a Gold and Silver won in Paris 2024 he became Scotland's most decorated Olympian. For Team Scotland, swimming brought home the most medals from the Commonwealth Games in 2022.

In terms of engagement in 2024, swimming was the third most popular sport after football and Formula One in terms of fan engagement among 18 to 24 year olds. [24]

It is not just competition at the top level which has its merits. Aquatics offers a tiered competition structure for more than 15,000 athletes in pools across Scotland, teaching essential skills of commitment, resilience, perseverance and determination.

Scotland has had consistent success in hosting international competitions in the last decade including the Commonwealth Games, the World Para Swimming Championships and two European Championships. Not only do these prestigious events put Scotland in the spotlight on the world stage, but they drive economic benefits in terms of tourism. We welcome back the Commonwealth Games in 2026 to Glasgow.

The economic benefits of pools go further. Lying at the heart of many a community, pools attract families to live in an area, driving social value as an essential component of the social economy. With an ever increasing burden on the NHS, never more so have the benefits of swimming pools in terms of safety, health, social value and sport been so important to drive forward sustainable success in Scotland.



24 EY Sports Engagement Index Top 15 Ranks.

Success Case Study: Duncan Scott OBE



Duncan Scott is Great Britain's most decorated athlete in any sport at one Olympic Games and Scotland's most decorated Olympic swimmer ever.

In 2014, at the age of 16, Duncan burst on to the international swimming scene winning a Commonwealth Games silver medal in the 4x200m Freestyle Relay for Team Scotland in Glasgow. Soon after in 2015 he made his first appearance at the European Games, winning three golds and three silvers to become Great Britain's most decorated athlete. Later that year, at his debut appearance at a World Championships, he took home the gold medal as part of the men's 4x200m Freestyle Relay team.

The summer of 2016 cemented Duncan's status on the international stage. He returned from the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro as a two-time silver medallist having formed part of the Men's 4x200m Freestyle and 4x100m Medley Relay teams that finished narrowly behind the all-star USA team led by Michael Phelps. A testament to his huge potential, Duncan also achieved a fifth-place finish in the Men's 100m Freestyle, in the process setting a new British record of 48.01 seconds and becoming the first British man to reach the Freestyle final since Bobby McGregor in 1968.

This success continued and at just 20 years old, Duncan had amassed the highest ever total of medals achieved by a Scottish swimmer in a Commonwealth Games. The 2018 Gold Coast event saw Duncan win a total of six medals: one gold, one silver and four bronzes. In honour of this incredible contribution to Scotland's largest ever medal tally (44), Duncan was selected as Team Scotland's flag bearer at the Games' closing ceremony.

Having won 4 medals at the European championships in 2018 in Glasgow Duncan went on to win a gold in the Men's 4x100m Medley Relay and bronze in the 200m Freestyle at the 2019 World Championships in Gwangju. 2020 was the longest Duncan had experienced out of the pool due to the pandemic, but despite the delay of the Tokyo Olympics, Duncan maintained his focus and form setting a new British record at the 2021 British Championships of 1:55:90 in the 200m Individual Medley, a new British record in the 200m Freestyle with a time of 1:44:47 and equalled his existing British Record in the 100m Freestyle.

With a busy racing schedule Duncan continued to make history, claiming an impressive medal haul at the delayed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. He achieved gold in the men's 4 x 200m Freestyle Relay and silver in the men's Medley Relay which set a new European record of 3:27.51. He also took silver in the 200m Freestyle and the 200m Individual Medley where he set a new British Record of 1:55.28, making him Great Britain's most decorated athlete in any sport at one Olympic Games and Great Britain's most decorated Olympic swimmer ever.

This record haul deservedly led to Duncan being recognised for services to swimming in the 2022 New Years honours list with an MBE and then in the 2024 New Years Honours with an OBE.

At the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games Duncan amassed 2 gold medals in his signature 200m Freestyle and 200m Individual Medley in addition to 4 bronze medals, making him Scotland's most decorated athlete ever in the Commonwealth Games. Most recently at the Paris 2024 Olympics Duncan won gold in the Men's 4 x 200m Freestyle Relay and silver in the 200m Individual Medley sealing his place in history as Scotland's most decorated Olympian.

As well as his significant achievements on the international swimming scene, Duncan has also been a strong voice for clean sport, a Learn to Swim ambassador and an advocate for the Save Our Pools campaign. Duncan commented:

"To me swimming is the greatest sport in the world, not just because it has given me so much, but because it's a life skill that millions of children need to learn to be confident and safe in, on and around water. Swimming pools are a vital part of the nation's fight against health problems and they help to keep people of all ages mentally and physical fit and healthy.

"We need investment in pools to give everyone the opportunity to learn to swim and in doing so, keep current and future generations safe, fit and healthy."

Conclusion & Recommendations

It is evident that swimming and swimming pools have a pivotal role in shaping the health of the nation, our success as a sport and the safety and wellbeing of children and adults across Scotland.

Without these critical community assets we risk a lost generation with children unable to swim, a greater burden on the NHS and a lack of accessible exercise and health opportunities for those who need them most.

To be a fairer and more inclusive Scotland, to continue our significant sporting success and to ensure the health and safety of future generations, Scottish Swimming recommend the following actions for national and local government:

- **Invest in school swimming to provide water safety education and skills to every child in Scotland, especially those who cannot swim**
- **Support investment for the sustainable pools of the future, renovating existing pool stocks to make them energy efficient and building the next generation of carbon-efficient pools**
- **Align the benefits of community sport with health ambitions and requirements through co-location of services to ensure sport is at the forefront of health preventative measures**
- **Promote swimming as a positive pursuit to drive the health agenda in Scotland particularly for the inactive who would benefit from the unique qualities of water-based exercise**

With the right support and long term financial commitment we can create a healthier, more active and fairer Scotland with opportunities to swim for all for life.



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